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Bringing It All Together: The Creative Process of Artist and Writer Jacqueline Bishop

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Born in Jamaica, residing in New York City, and frequently traveling internationally, Jacqueline Bishop is a prolific writer, photographer, visual artist and cultural activist. She is a bold, brave and frank writer, who can also be humorous. She tackles ambitious and cutting-edge artistic projects that express her own imagination, inquire into the subjectivities of others, engage with social realities and promote intercultural connections. Her poetry, short stories, novel and non-fiction writing, oral history projects, line drawings, watercolor and acrylic paintings, sand paintings, digital collages/ montages, and textile arts (embroidery, quilt making, and weaving) have reached audiences in the form of six published books, web publications, a long list of exhibitions in various countries, and documented international artistic exchange projects. As her most recent book establishes, the observer's awareness of her work in one genre amplifies an appreciation and understanding of her work in the other genres.

Although I had been reading her poetry and fiction and assigning it to my students before I first met Jacqueline Bishop, it was in Jamaica at her 2012 Calabash Lit Fest presentation of one of her books, *Writers Who Paint/ Painters Who Write: Three Jamaican Artists* (Leeds, Peepal Tree Press, 2008), that I started to become aware of and follow her copious and varied work as an artist. During her subsequent trip to Puerto Rico as an invited guest speaker at my university and two of my trips to New York to give poetry readings, as well as in online chats and phone conversations, we began to compare notes about our interests in the creative process of Caribbean writers who are also socially-committed visual artists. Conducted by e-mail, this interview is part of our ongoing conversation, occasioned this time by Bishop's current visual arts projects and her recently published sixth book *The Gymnast and Other Positions* (Peepal Tree Press, 2015). In the preface, "Looking Forward by Looking Back," she calls *The Gymnast* a "fulfilment of a personal philosophy," a text that, of her six, is most fully representative of who she is "because it is a coming together of so many parts of [herself]." Bishop's hybrid book is divided into three sections that include ten "short short" fictional stories, ten essays, and ten dialogues that Bishop has had with interviewers, including several passages that touch on Bishop's multidisciplinary artwork. It was shortlisted for the overall 2016 OCM Bocas Caribbean Literature Award, and it won in the category of prose (NGC Bocas Lit Fest, Trinidad and Tobago).

The Gymnast and Other Positions provides glimpses into Bishop's background. It may be helpful as a preamble to this interview for a reader to know that she grew up in Kingston, Jamaica, spending periods of her childhood with her grandmother and great grandparents in the rural district of Nonsuch in the parish of Portland, a fact that figures heavily in her creative output. Bishop frequently returns to Jamaica and continues to have multiple projects based on Nonsuch. She teaches in the

Liberal Studies Program at New York University, and she has received many awards and grants, including five Jamaica Cultural Development Commission Awards in poetry and fiction writing, a James Michener Creative Writing Fellowship, and Fulbright travel grants to France (also funded by UNESCO) and Morocco, among other awards. She has completed advanced academic degrees in poetry, fiction, and the visual arts.

In this conversation, we focus on seven topics, discussing Bishop's process as a multi-genre artist and writer, as well as the important role that childhood experiences and artistic endeavors of generations of women in her family have played in her choices of artistic media, themes and techniques. She takes on strong subjects in *The Gymnast*, including, among other topics, abandonment, the vulnerability of children, child pornography, child slavery and the lives of restavecs, gender oppression, grief over murdered loved ones, healthcare in Jamaican hospitals, immigration, partisan politics, peer-bullying of boys, police killings of civilians, narcoculture, sexual exploitation, social class divisions, verbal abuse, and violence. She also writes about healing and redemptive subjects, such as ancestral spirituality, environmental consciousness, and woman-culture. However, this interview concentrates on Bishop's inclusion of child subjects in her art and writing, her recent work on female sexual desire, the palpability of the natural world and landscape in her art and writing, the importance of interviewing as a writerly practice, and some of her latest international artistic projects.

THE CREATIVE LINK BETWEEN ART AND WRITING

LK: Jacqueline, congratulations on your recent OCM Bocas literary award. In the preface of *The Gymnast and Other Positions*, you note that of all of the books that you have published so far, this hybrid book is "the most representative" of who you are. Why so?

JB: Thanks for your congratulations. I really appreciate that. I think that this book is the most representative of who I am because I am allowed to be all of who I am as an artist in this book. By this I mean that I get to be a fiction writer, a non-fiction writer, a poet and a visual artist all at once. In putting *The Gymnast and Other Positions* together, it felt like a great coming together for me. What do I mean by this? I have been lucky enough to have been interviewed several times by several thoughtful persons about my work, and it is a writer's conceit to know that her work is being read and taught by others. But as much as I appreciate the efforts of so many people who appreciate my work, I always felt that most people would call upon one aspect of my creativity, whether it was me as a poet, a fiction writer, or a visual artist. I can understand the necessity of doing so. Especially when oftentimes the publication that one is publishing in dictates the terms of the interview, whether

it is a poetry publication or a visual arts publication. What happened with *The Gymnast and Other Positions* is that I got to see all of my creative production laid out in front of me all at once, and I could see cross-references that I could not see before, various preoccupations. I could even see myself at work, something that is hard to do when you are in the midst of working. The book is self-reflexive in that way.

LK: In your interview with Keisha-Gaye Anderson, included in the final section of *The Gymnast and Other Positions*, you say that your visual arts series often have a strong story-telling or narrative element. Does the influence go both ways? Has the cross-fertilization between your artwork and writing also inspired you to be increasingly experimental in your writing techniques?

JB: Excellent question. Had you asked me this question before *The Gymnast* was published, I would have said that the influence goes one way: From my writing to my visual art. Actually, that is not completely true; what I would have said is that there is no influence at all between being a writer and a visual artist. For a long time I saw being a writer and being an artist as existing in two totally different realms, and I treated them as such. My process for my creative life went like this: I had the urge to create but for a long time I was unclear of my medium. I started, after I got my bachelor's degree in psychology, of all things, attending poetry writing and fiction writing classes at the Writer's Voice at the West Side YMCA in Manhattan. At the time, I was thinking about graduate school, and, in fact, I applied to and was accepted to the MFA Program in English at City College of New York, where I did one semester. I did not like City College much because it seemed the creative writing classes that I took were not very serious. At the Writer's Voice I had studied with Donna Masini, who had studied at NYU, and she suggested looking into NYU. It was a great suggestion because I ended up transferring to the MA program at NYU. At NYU, you came in either as a fiction writer or as a poet. I felt I could put together a stronger poetry portfolio for NYU, and that is what I did. Later, after I completed the poetry degree, I reapplied to the MFA Program at NYU and was accepted to do a fiction degree.

I honestly felt that those two degrees in poetry and fiction would do it for me, that they would cure the itch inside of me to be a visual artist. But, all along I was drawing and painting and taking photographs in secret. I felt incredibly afraid of pursuing the visual arts. I worried that I had no real talent in visual arts, and what would that make me, anyway, if I were to go off and do visual arts, as well? I have, in other interviews, talked about how Veerle Poupeye of the National Gallery of Jamaica and Edward Sullivan at New York University, were each, in their own way, quite helpful to me in pursuing my dreams and my goals as a visual artist. Perhaps the person who was most instrumental in my development as both a

creative writer and a visual artist is a woman I have thanked in all my books, but who, for the most part, has remained in the shadows, and would be happy to do so, except I am going to pull her out of the shadows now, and it is my analyst of many years, Karen Singleton-Vega. She did more than anyone else to get me to pursue my goals --- all of them. She pushed, poked and prodded because I was, at times, overwhelmed by all the things I wanted to do, but, thank goodness, she could see it all quite clearly.

With Karen's help, I tackled each calling separately, and they stayed separate for a long time. I just graduated with yet another MFA, this time from the Maryland Institute College of Art. In my thesis meeting prior to graduation, I found myself in tears because I realized that I had done it. I had proven to myself that I could be accepted as a visual artist as well as a writer. And after strenuous efforts to separate my life as a writer and a visual artist, I felt, finally, that I could bring them both together. I could for the first time see the cross-fertilization that had taken place in both my writing and my visual arts.

Now, as I look back on my work, my childhood memories series of photographs is nothing if not the visual equivalent of my first collection of poems, *Fauna* (Peepal Tree, 2006). In the small beautiful book, *Writers Who Paint/ Painters Who Write: Three Jamaican Artists* (Peepal Tree, 2008), I see now that, despite my resistances, I was trying to bring together both areas of my life. And in my second collection of poems, *Snapshots from Istanbul* (Peepal Tree, 2009), I was beginning to seek out female sexual desires and the erotic, which would be on full display in the "Female Sexual Desires" work. So I would say that the influence now goes both ways, and maybe this cross-fertilization has added to me being more experimental in my fiction writing with framing devices, and such, but this is oftentimes happening at a very unconscious level.

LK: One of the interviews in *The Gymnast and Other Positions* is aptly titled "Charting a Literary Journey," perhaps an appropriate subtitle for the collection, as a whole. Throughout, there are references and tributes to other writers. In the years that I've known you, you always have multiple art and writing projects going on simultaneously; nonetheless, in addition to nurturing your own creative spirit and getting new work out there, you also put a great deal of effort into facilitating others, being a cultural activist, helping to promote the work of writers and artists, and engaging in community building across national borders. What are the obstacles for developing artists and writers? Does the composite portrait provided in *The Gymnast* tell a complete story regarding how you were mentored as an emerging writer and artist, and how you, in turn, have been committed to reciprocity and self-help between writers and artists? What would you like to add now about that?

JB: For me, this, ultimately, is a question about class. I think you have to have the time to dedicate to the arts, and you need to have the resources to make art. I think this is the greatest obstacle that so many developing writers and artists face. This is not to say that there aren't artists who have emerged that have next to no resources but if you look at a group, say the untutored visual artists in Jamaica, that group is almost exclusively male, and when I asked a female artist about this, she quite rightly pointed out that female artists, in particular, neither had the time nor the money to engage in this work. A lot of us emerging now as visual artists and writers have many degrees associated with our names, and your question forces me to think about the artist/s, especially the female artist who does not have the luxury of getting these degrees. On the other hand, it is true, some of us are burdened with student debt forever in getting these degrees.

No, *The Gymnast* does not tell a complete story about how I was mentored. When I was a student at NYU, for example, Paule Marshall was there, and she had some wonderful things to tell me about writing, including to just do my own work regardless of its reception. Then Dean of the GSAS at the time, Catharine Stimpson, was very helpful in getting my journal *Calabash* off the ground. Stimpson would go on to be very helpful to me in all kinds of ways. At NYU, I studied extensively with Sharon Olds, the poet, and I gained a lot from that. The late E.L. Doctorow and Galway Kinnell. There are, of course, other mentors not mentioned just now, but that should give you a flavor of how extensive the mentoring went.

I actually think mentoring is a double-edged sword and can get conflated with all sorts of issues. Unfortunately, I oftentimes find people who do not take well to criticism, and who can be quite hostile actually to any form of criticism. So, all in all, while I am for mentoring others and being mentored myself, I do think we have to enter this situation with highly critical eyes and an awareness of our limits.

LK: I think that your photograph on the cover of the *The Gymnast* connects so well with much of the content. Do you prefer to just let it speak for itself? Or is there anything that you would like to say about it?

JB: The photograph on the cover of the book is of a young girl from the district of Nonsuch, parish of Portland, in Jamaica, where my family is from. I started photographing her and a few other individuals in the district for what I now know are two projects I am undertaking simultaneously: A project on memory that I am still in the midst of; and a project called "Tristes Tropiques" that I think I am wrapping up. Interestingly, the young woman on the cover (her name is Maya) plays a central role in both of these projects. With Maya the thing that surprised me the most is how much the camera loves this child. Adores her really, the camera. As I say to people from time to time, Maya cannot take a bad photograph! I have

never seen anything like that before. She has such a stunning photographic presence, and she is absolutely and totally gorgeous. Just beautiful. I look at her and think, my goodness, if I ever had a child --- a daughter at that --- that came out looking like Maya, I would drop to my knees and thank whatever power sent her into my life. Looking back at it now, the cover image was the absolute best one for *The Gymnast and Other Positions*, but I did not know that then, because, as I have said, I was photographing Maya for two totally different projects. Indeed, Hannah (of Peepal Tree Press), who designs the book covers, and I had been going back and forth with other cover possibilities when I thought to send this photograph in. That ended the discussion completely, and Hannah sent me back a cover that took my breath away. Interestingly enough, I think it connects so perfectly with the title story. As the writer Sharon Leach said to me when I sent her the cover, "It looks exactly like the gymnast!"

Another thing I want to say about the cover is that I have heard from so many women, particularly dark skinned black women, about how much they love the cover. How much they appreciate this dark skinned absolutely gorgeous child on the cover. So many women told me that they cannot remember the last time, if ever, that a dark skinned female child got the love that Maya got to be placed on the cover of a book.

FAMILY INHERITANCES AND ARTISTIC METHODOLOGIES

LK: A reader can gather from this book that your family members provided you with knowledge, narrative skills, and artistic abilities that are still essential to your current development as an artist and writer. Of your great grandmother, you say, "I cannot separate her… from the African Tulip tree, or from the mountains. Those blue/gray, purple/blue mountains, the mountains of Nonsuch" (64). I believe that this statement may have originally been an annotation to one of your own quilt or collage projects. In one of the interviews, you recall a day when your grandmother drew a picture for you, validating your own desire to create. On another day, she sewed a cotton apron for you to wear in a cooking class when you were a school girl. *The Gymnast and Other Positions* is livicated to Emma, your grandmother. You say that your "mother could crochet everything in sight and [your] great grandmother would stitch together old discarded pieces of cloth to make quilts so beautiful that some have since gone on to be exhibited" (128). How have you carried on with the textile arts and skills inherited from the women in your family? Did your coursework in the various MFA programs that you have completed at NYU and MICA add techniques to your repertoire in textile arts?

JB: Increasingly as I look at my work as a professional artist, I become clearer and clearer about how a lot of what I do is implicated in the work that I saw the women

in my family doing. I have not only gone on to make patchwork/quilts like my great grandmother and grandmother did, but textile art—which is the art form I saw many of the women around me practicing— has become increasingly important to me. If you look for example, at the "Female Desires Project," it is almost exclusively a textile project consisting of embroidery, appliqué, quilt-making and woven pieces, which are all art forms, in one way or another, that I grew up with as a child in Jamaica. Now I am interpreting the patchwork aesthetic of my grandmother and great grandmother into photographs. As a child, my great grandmother would have what I now know are collages made from newsprints and calendars hanging in her house --- gorgeous things --- and I find myself increasingly using collage in my work. It is unclear to me whether I inherited these skills from the women in my family, but I think it made a difference for me to see the women employ these skills artistically.

You hardly ever are taught technique, *per se,* in MFA programs. Rather, the focus is on critiquing your work and getting you to understand your motivations for doing the work, and how can you best achieve your ideas. Developing a repertoire of technical skills is something that you are more or less expected to do on your own. There might be a short sewing class here or there, but nothing particularly exhaustive. Consequently, the techniques I learned at NYU and MICA are more critical and analytical tools, and not the art-making tools that are usually dedicated to undergraduate classes. That said, I have to give a huge shout out to MICA Fibers Department! I basically lived in that place for all of my MFA experience at MICA. In particular, I have to give a huge shout out to Michelle Edwards-Longway who was patience's own self with me, because I did not even know how to turn on a sewing machine when I started the "Female Sexual Desires Project." The final look of the "Female Sexual Desires Project" is in large part due to Michelle who I pestered endlessly as I tried to figure out how to execute this project. Thank you, Michelle!

LK: Besides saying something about your quilts and where they have been exhibited, would you say something about other projects that you have completed recently or are still working on? What would you like to say about "By the Work of Her Hands," a recent project not discussed in *The Gymnast?*

JB: Altogether I have over 39 patchworks made by women in my family: including 5 patchworks made by my great grandmother, 5 by my grandmother and the rest by me. Some or all of these quilts have been exhibited in Morocco, in Italy, in the United States, and in Jamaica. It gives me pause to think how my grandmother and great grandmother get to travel to these places with me, via their quilts, and I think my great grandmother who had a habit of leaving food outside for unseen relatives,

and who attended a "wrap-head" church, must have been awed to return thus to the continent of Africa, where, I am convinced, it all began.

"By the Work of Her Hands: Textile Arts in Morocco and the United States" is an oral history project that trained first and second-year college students in Morocco and the United States to collect oral histories from female textile artists in their respective countries. The project sought to reverse the silencing and voicelessness that attends the work of embroidery makers in Morocco and African American quilt-makers in the United States. This oral history project documented the voices of female textile artists associated with the Au Grain de Sesame Collective in Rabat and the Quilters of Color Collective in New York. The year-long project was fantastic and very successful, in so far as friendships were made, cultural understanding was deepened, and the traditional textile techniques of both countries were preserved and safeguarded.

CHILDHOOD, CHILD PSYCHOLOGY AND TRAUMA

LK: In the interview "Art: Synaesthetic Experience" (*The Gymnast*), Michela Calderaro asks you what, in your opinion are the "main features that characterize Caribbean women artists." You answer: "Our concern with the lives of women and girls" (150). Concern over the vulnerability of girl children in Jamaica to abuse and exploitation is expressed in this collection, as in your earlier work. Boy children are also at risk, mainly in terms of losing educational opportunities, being killed by police for doing nothing at all ("Effigy"), and induction into petty crimes and boyish pranks, leading later to more serious criminality ("Zemi"). In your novel *The River's Song* (Peepal Tree Press, 2006), the coming-of-age story features a girl child protagonist. In *The Gymnast and Other Positions* some of the fictional protagonists and characters are children. Moreover, in the essays and interviews, you discuss your own childhood experiences, memories, and photographs, even interviewing your family members about their conflicting memories about the day of your birth. As a writer and artist why do you retrieve and examine your own childhood, explore child psychology and trauma (as in the stories "Tall Tale" and "Terra Nova"), and try to give children a voice in your work? Are children's voices silenced by the adult world? Are childhood memories repressed? Is intergenerational knowledge lost? Why are children's stories important in your creative work?

JB: When I was a child in Jamaica what parents, grandparents, and great grandparents would say all the time is that "children should be seen and not heard." That was something I very much grew up on. The more silent and unspoken especially a girl-child was, the better behaved she was thought to be. I remember when I was collecting the oral histories for *My Mother Who Is Me: Life Stories*

From Jamaican Women (Africa World Press, 2006), almost all the women would talk about the silencing around childhood, especially for girl-children. I remember struggling so much with this as a child, because, in fact, I was a quiet sort of child, a homebody. More introverted than extroverted. Maybe now, as I think about it, it was this shyness from my childhood that forced me into being a writer because writing and the visual arts became such an outlet for me.

I think why too many people in Jamaica and, from what I gather, the larger Caribbean try so desperately to silence children, and why it is important for me as a writer, thinker, artist and person to hear their voices, is that children oftentimes ask uncomfortable questions, and say uncomfortable things, in large part because they have not been fully conditioned into the mores of whatever society that they have been born into. Children cross boundaries without even recognizing that they are doing so, and they tend to tell the truth.

I think I retrieve and examine my own childhood because it is very informative of the kind of artist and writer that I have grown up to be. I use my childhood to understand what is important to me. But to be truthful, it is a little more than that. My family is no different from most families in that things have gone on, especially between adults and children, which had no business taking place. I don't want to paint this with a broad brush over all or even most of my family members, but just a lack of healthy psychological boundaries, in general. What I have seen and experienced in my family is that children were made to assume adult burdens and adult responsibilities much too early in life. Especially girl children. These children in effect became the parents of their parents. Those things scar and traumatize. My hope is that we will all become more sensitive to the child's perspective. A cousin and an aunt of mine got into a serious argument the other day because my cousin is totally irresponsible, and he blames his irresponsibility and bad choices on his having the most amazing boy child --- "If I did not have you, my life would be so much easier!" He looked at the child and said. My aunt rightfully cursed his ass out, and all the time, the child was just standing there, all of seven years old, and wondering what he --- the child --- had done wrong. He never said a word, this beautiful boy; my aunt said he just stood there and took it. She started seeing a deformity set in regarding how he sees and thinks of himself. I would have felt better, actually, if this child had said something. Had a voice. Spoken up for himself. Spoken back. But no doubt he would have gotten a terrible beating because --- children should be seen and not heard. So, yes, I try to give children a voice in my work, particularly in the two stories that you mentioned --- "Tall Tale" and "Terra Nova." And yes, I believe far too often children's voices are silenced by and within the adult world, childhood memories are repressed, and children's particular knowledge and insights about their world as they are living and experiencing and acting upon and coming to know it does indeed become lost.

FEMALE SEXUAL DESIRE

LK: In the preface of *The Gymnast*, you celebrate this first effort to anthologize some of your dynamic and provocative "short short" stories, a new writing genre for you that you say you have started to work on relatively recently. All of the fast-moving short stories are just 3-6 pages long, but they deliver a punch. The title of the collection is also the title of the lead "short short" story, "The Gymnast," an audacious, erotic, and playful story ostensibly about manipulation of the female protagonist, the expectations of others (in this case, men or the society), gender roles, sexuality, empowerment and pleasure. It certainly left me smiling and heading for the fruit vendors' stalls. Sometimes in your writing, the realm of sexuality can be a space of abandonment, abuse, betrayal, coercion, depression, exploitation, manipulation, masochistic self-erasure, psychological damage, long-lasting trauma, pain/pleasure, predation against girl (and boy) children, or violence inflicted by others (men or adults); however, though this story and others do highlight some of these adverse aspects of sexual relations, it and some of the other stories also explore "the erotic," female desire, pleasure—and even a sensual connection to the earth—, as empowering and joyful. To me, it seems like for you, the quality of the story always comes first; you trust the power of narrative to entertain, move and inform the reader. Social concerns are frequently addressed in your writing, as well, though. Would you say that stories such as "The Gymnast," "Oleander," and "A Giant Blue Swallowtail Butterfly," for instance, are, in some ways, interconnected to your current on-going oral narratives/ textile arts project on female sexual desire? If so, how?

JB: I think that those stories are very much connected to my "Female Sexual Desires Project." In each of the stories you have listed, the female protagonist invokes her sexuality, and, similarly, in the "Female Sexual Desires Project" you have women NAMING their sexual desires. For some of the women in the stories, desires that had been cloaked and repressed --- as in "The Gymnast" and "A Giant Swallowtail Butterfly" --- are finally set free, and I cannot tell you how many women in my "Female Sexual Desires Project" --- talked about how freeing it was to name, and, in a sense, set free their sexual desires. In "The Gymnast" and "A Giant Blue Swallowtail Butterfly," you have women reclaiming themselves and their sexuality as part of themselves and something for themselves, as often happened in the art project. Of course in the art project, there are also works that look at ways that female sexuality has been turned against or turned upon women, as in the case of incest, rape and other cruel forms of attack and abuse. I think the short story "Oleander" speaks to the ways that disfiguring can happen in women's lives, via their sexuality.

LK: Is it also possible to read the metaphors and symbols of these stories about women and sexuality as related to the artist's journey towards creative freedom, self-actualization and autonomy? Any insights to offer about this?

JB: I very much like that reading, and the very positive spin you put on sexuality, and how it can all be connected to a larger overall journey of creative freedom, self-actualization and autonomy. Goodness, just the thought of that makes me excited for the possibilities of further work! You see when I was growing up in Jamaica, sex was a shadowy, hushed thing that no one but a school nurse once a year ever spoke to you about. Underneath all the things that were said about sex, especially in regards to female sexuality and the female body, it was all clinical if it was not dirty and abominable. I did not see much difference in the United States when I moved here to live, and, indeed, what I did see in the United States was verging more on the pornographic, which for me is all about a sexuality that is exploitative and not centered around one's individual pleasure. As I have come to explore sexuality and sexual desires in women more and more, I have come to face not only the blockages in my own psyche regarding what I was taught and told about my sexuality as a child in Jamaica, having to contrast this with the ribald nature of Dancehall music, which, for all its issues, I very much like— but I have also come to appreciate the purity and the essence of sexuality. I have come to appreciate that sexuality is a life force, like breathing, like sleeping, like any other. Sexuality animates our lives, and the more I clear away the cobwebs that have been placed over and around and upon particularly female sexuality, the more wholesome and integrated my journey as an artist becomes.

LK: I know that you have accomplished many works of art related to the "Female Sexual Desires Project." Where are you right now in that project? What have you done? What do you plan to do? Does it build on the kind of work published in *The Gymnast*?

JB: I started the "Female Sexual Desires Project" by collecting over 150 detailed responses from women in regards to a series of questions I posed. I then used these narratives to make several works: An audio piece in which several women read from the desires collected, thereby tangibly and literally adding the voices of several women to the project. I also did two video pieces, in which I discuss the process of making the work and my response to the various sexist as well as racist responses that were told to me while doing the work; a third video piece incorporates sometimes one word or one sentence from each of the respondents in the project.

I also used the responses elicited to make several fiber pieces. Among the fiber pieces are: 60 embroidery "drawings" of sexual positions, roughly 20 bed-sized

appliquéd quilts, and 12 woven pieces that have the textual narratives printed on canvas strips and run through the weavings. Altogether, this work bridges several mediums including sound, video, and fiber pieces. There is a particular emphasis in working in fiber because I loved the juxtaposition of domesticity and pliant femininity often implied in fiber works being juxtaposed against the raunchiness and eroticism of the responses elicited. In doing this work, I am seeking to make invisible female sexual desires not only more visible, but I am seeking, as well, to give agency to bodies that for too long have only been thought of as dead or damaged "sites of contention." I guess the overall argument I am making in this work is that while artists have created and still are creating a moving and powerful body of work on how the female body and bodies of color are "sites of contention," there is significantly less attention being paid to how these bodies are also (and in addition) sites of pleasure, agency and desire.

Looking back at it now, I guess that the *Gymnast,* which I wrote BEFORE I started working on the "Female Sexual Desires Project," prefigures and foregrounds a long-standing interest in eroticism, especially from a female perspective. Many of the stories in that collection explore sexuality and eroticism, though sometimes this eroticism is turned in upon the female character. What I am coming to learn about myself and my process is to trust the work maybe more than I trust myself. I feel like as a writer and visual artist I am in service to my creation, and the work uses me to come into being. What I am coming to realize is that long before my preoccupations and obsessions become fully known to me, they are at play in my work.

NATURE, THE VEGETABLE WORLD, LANDSCAPE

LK: In one of my favorite stories in the collection *The Gymnast*— "Oleander" (which somehow reminds me of both Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Oval Portrait" and Japanese director Yoichi Takabayashi's film *Irezumi- Spirit of Tattoo*), the young woman protagonist seeks out not a priest, bartender, or therapist, but a skilled tattoo artist, who, over a series of appointments, inscribes her skin, brands her, with a lush, sensual tattoo, elaborating an oleander flower and greenery that starts at her navel and then eventually nearly envelops her entire body. At these sessions of pain/pleasure, she slowly begins to tell the artist her own secret history. In preparing the manuscript of this book, as you reread these short short stories, essays and interviews in relationship to each other—the short shorts "Oleander", the poignant "Effigy", and "Zemi", or the essays "Walker Family Stories" and "Photographs on the Mantelpiece," for instance— what new insights did you have about how and why the recurrent imagery of the vegetable world and topography have been ever-present in your creative œuvre?

JB: To answer this question I am pulling quite liberally from what you have written about my work, which is that my work has a strong environmental consciousness and use of natural imagery that are linked to my own familial roots, history, and spirituality, as well as a sense of displacement through migration. As you have noted Loretta, Jamaican vegetation such as hibiscus flowers, crotons, oleanders, flamboyant trees, calabash trees, love bush, star-apples, red ginger, birds, the endangered and rare giant swallowtail butterflies, and the land itself (especially the countryside, rivers, caves, and ruined buildings of the district of Nonsuch in the parish of Portland, the umbral of my ancestral family) are often featured in my work.

In *The Gymnast And Other Positions* I remain surprised at how New York gets "Caribbeanized" as Jamaican flora and fauna appear in metropolitan settings. Although the Caribbean natural world in my writing and art is sometimes treacherous, gorgeous but deceptively poisonous, the location of mythic dangers, a spectral place of river mummas and duppies, elegiac and phantasmagoric landscapes, or the haunted site of violent events of history that still imbue some swatches of land with undissipated negative energy and half-remembered horrors, in my work nature is also supremely grounding—a source of beauty, a healthy, healing balm that connects one to the ancestors, those partially-known heritage stories, settling and unsettling places of memory, a means of belonging, and subliminal and unconscious links between past and present. Nature is a source for mother culture and woman-strength, folkloric knowledge, and redemptive spiritual practices handed down and intuitively inherited from African or Taíno belief systems.

There is also something else going on with my nature work. I use the female body to try and come to terms with how the female is perceived oftentimes as an exotic, erotic object both on the island (by men, and particularly by tourists who come to the island) and off the island by foreigners. There is a sense that the female is not able to be seen for herself, but instead, is conflated with the landscape all around her. In this way, I am trying to link identity to the way we, as Jamaican women, are often seen by others, and the associations that come with that gaze. Of course when one does this, there is also something that suggests the violence of identification, of (super-)impositions, of objectification, all of which I hope is part of the thinking when looking at particularly my visual artwork. I have a photograph, for example, titled "Folly Flower," where the young girl's eyes are almost totally covered by the petals of flowers. In the new body of work that I am doing— "Tristes Tropiques"— I invoke these ideas by photographing young Jamaican girls dressed up in Jamaican flowers, but you can see, from the looks on their faces, how angry they feel in having to "perform" these roles. These young girls know and hate the idea that they are not being seen in their totality.

From a slightly different angle, the images might also suggest an erotic connection—particularly with the use of fruit, which suggests fecundity, and now, as I think about it, perhaps there is also something in this work about desire, and the associations of place, nourishment, beauty, and the pleasure associated with fruit and flowers.

THE VALUE OF INTERVIEWS FOR ARTISTS AND WRITERS

LK: In the last third of *The Gymnast*, ten interviewers ask you over one hundred questions. Your own first publication was an oral history project, a book-length ethnographic work titled *My Mother Who is Me: Life Stories of Jamaican Women in New York*. You frequently publish interviews that you have conducted with writers and artists from the Caribbean and from other international locations. For you, as both a subject who has been often interviewed and as a dedicated interviewer of others, what is the value of "the interview" as a genre? Why do you value interviews?

JB: Of course, it is possible to "read" a creator in the work that they produce/d, in their obsessions as those that are reflected in their work, but sometimes things can go haywire in this process. I remember a review of *Fauna* where the reviewer said that she was sorry for me because of the incest poems in that book. Such a review crossed the line, I felt, in conflating me-the-writer with the character in a poem. For me, the necessity of the interview is that the creator gets to speak for herself, unencumbered. The creator gets to talk about, and at its best, reflect on what she has created. That is what I believe is the value of the interview as a genre.

I think what an interview gets at that a work of art does not, is an actual sense of the person who created the work, their motivations, which may or may not be reflected or implicated in a work of art. I think it is fair to say that there are parts of myself reflected in and through what it is that I create, but then again there are some of my creations that have nothing autobiographical to do with myself. To think otherwise is to limit the imagination, and I don't think you can put a limit on imagination, at all, and I don't think that our biography has to always be implicated in or defined by our imaginations or what we create.

An interview can give a creator the chance to explain and contextualize a work. At its best, an interview makes us think about things that may not be so obvious to us as interviewees and creators. I will give you an example of what I am talking about. I recently had the opportunity to interview the Jamaican poet Ann-Margaret Lim for a poetry month feature in the *Observer Arts Magazine*. Ann-Margaret has a pretty stunning second collection of poems coming out from Peepal Tree Press tentatively titled, *Kingston Buttercup,* and all throughout, that collection is haunted by an absent mother-figure. Knowing that Ann-Margaret herself is a mother, and

that she simply adores her child, I felt this theme was just residual guilt that most working mothers feel about not-doing-enough for their child. As I probed in the interview about this absent mother-figure, I got a whole different story, and I think both Ann-Margaret and I were surprised where that probing took her to.

I value interviews as both a subject of an interview and an interviewer for all of the reasons you have indicated above --- because it is one of the perks of being an artist to have someone interested in your work, to open up a larger audience to your work and to add context to your work. In this regard Sharon Leach of the *Observer Arts Magazine* in Jamaica should be recognized and praised for the work that she has been doing for over a decade now in highlighting the work of artists and creators in the Caribbean, in general, and for having a focus on interviews in particular. The *Jamaica Observer* is a national newspaper with an international reach, and for some time now Leach has made space for really serious and even challenging interviews with writers, artists and thinkers, which has allowed these artists more visibility and a chance to clarify their ideas. I value the interview, yes, as a writer and artist because I find it helps me clarify my ideas, which in turn helps me clarify my work; and I also value the interview because it allows people to see the work that goes into creating a work of art.

NEW PROJECTS OF SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT: THE AFRICAN DIASPORA, ORAL HISTORIES, AND ARTISTIC CULTURAL EXCHANGE

LK: In the essays and interviews of *The Gymnast and Other Positions,* you discuss your identity and lived experiences as a writer and artist born and raised in Jamaica, but who has now lived for decades in New York, and, for extended periods, in France and Morocco. You emphasize that your creative work is still largely centered on Jamaica, and for you, "it is very important to actually go to Jamaica" as often as you can (131): "… I would be lying if I did not say that being an American is not a part of my identity as well. Indeed, I have lived in the United States longer than I have lived in Jamaica" (130). Since you often talk about identity issues in a forthright way, I won't ask for more elaboration about this. I am interested to know, however, how your international travel and collaborations (for instance with the textile artists of Au Grain Sésame from Morocco) might be impacting how you think about, write about, or create art about both the Jamaican or Caribbean societies and the US/ New York setting?

JB: One day when I lived in Morocco, I was walking through the medina in Rabat when I stopped short in coming face-to-face with a craft tradition I remembered from Jamaica. In the medina that day were beautiful multi-colored mats made from drawing strips of cloth through another piece of cloth. I grew up with my great grandmother doing this in Jamaica. I started to get a sense of the striated cloth

traditions that moved around with African diasporic peoples and found their way not only into mat-making but also into quilt-making in the US and for us in Jamaica, patchwork making. It was as though I could begin to see, in bits and pieces, how the traditions of Africa writ large had been reinterpreted in the African diaspora.

Later, as a UNESCO/Fulbright fellow in France, I searched out the African communities of Paris that I remembered from my student days there, and there again were those beautiful textiles that, yes, maybe were made in Indonesia or Belgium, but which the sub-Saharan African women wore with such grace and force that you knew that these textiles were their own, even if made elsewhere. I would purchase quite a bit of these textiles and after a full day of work at UNESCO, I would go home and make patchworks with these textiles just like I saw my great grandmother make in Jamaica. Now these patchworks made by myself, my grandmother and great grandmother have retraced the triangular trade route --- Africa, Europe, The Americas --- and my grandmothers and I have feminized this triangular trade route by focusing on female stories and (for me) a female art form. That is how travel has impacted my sense of being a Jamaican, and an offspring of the African-Diaspora, in the larger world. It has helped me to make connections where none existed before.

But more: When I lived in Morocco, and even before I could speak the language, I started asking my Moroccan friends for old scarves and jilbabs that I ended up cutting up and using alongside the quite stunning embroidery of Morocco, to create patchwork quilts. A Moroccan business woman, who, outside of her very important day job, ran an NGO where women made embroidery and whom I had been purchasing embroidery from, saw what I was doing and became intrigued. She got a hold of one of my patchworks, and before I knew it, the women were making patchwork embroideries. To make a long story short, these patchworks that I was doing caught the eye of, among others—the United States Embassy in Morocco, the Fulbright Program in Morocco, and the Au Grain de Sesame Female Collective in Morocco. They would eventually would become the basis of a grant by the United States State Department via the American Museum Association. That is what travel and living for a sustained time in a country adds to my repertoire as a writer, an artist and thinker. It allows me to build bridges among different groups of people and different types of art forms.

LK: As you have described the assemblage of this book, working on it was an opportunity to "reflect on the work" that you have "done so far and think about the work" that you "hope to do in the future." Even in the short time between handing in the finished manuscript to your editors at Peepal Tree Press and the book's publication, you completed and launched several new artistic, educational, and writing projects that the book anticipates but doesn't cover. A wonderful recent

project of yours, and your co-organizer, Jamaica-based Mrs. Venice Chin-See Parchment, is geared towards school children of both New York and Jamaica. "Dialogues in the African Diaspora" is investigating "the commonalties and differences in two African-Diasporic communities." Middle school students are using interviews and research to "recover and preserve the history associated with the rural community of Nonsuch in Portland, on the island of Jamaica, and the urban community of San Juan Hill in Manhattan, New York" (see the project Facebook page at: https://www.facebook.com/Dialogues-in-the-African-Diaspora-423786097827600/?ref=aymt_homepage_panel). The educational project is also an art project, right? I have seen some coverage of this exciting-looking project in Jamaican media recently. Tell us about the project and what the students in both locations have learned so far.

JB: The "Dialogues in the African Diaspora" project was a history and new media project that aimed to train middle-school aged children from the Nonsuch Primary school in rural Portland, Jamaica, and middle-school aged students at the Kipp S.T.A.R. Charter School in Harlem, in the United States, to research the submerged history of their respective communities. In an effort to engage the students as both actors and agents of history, the students also reinterpreted the history they have uncovered and recovered in digital, video, mapping and other new media art works. Working with museum staff, students curated exhibitions held on the island of Jamaica and in the United States. The specific outputs of the project included: The training of students in historical research, digital art making and mapping methods. The project has been completed, including the final phase now, and it has been so exciting to be a part of it. So many things we have found out! Nonsuch is where my family is from, and for a long time I wondered about its history, and where did, for example, the name of the district, Nonsuch, come from. Some of the elders in the district told the story of a white man passing through and saying that there was "none such place like this." Meanwhile a trained historian from the University of the West Indies, hired by the project, found out that there was a slave master and slaves attached to the name Nonsuch. On the surface of it, there seemed to be two competing stories, but, in fact, most likely, there was just one original story about how Nonsuch got its name, which got jumbled over the years.

Similarly, the students in Harlem sought to unearth the history of an African American community that was cleared out to make way for what is today Lincoln Center in New York City. In this community, as well, there are tantalizing references to the past, but, as in Nonsuch, the history remains submerged, and most people resident in or near what is now called mid-town Manhattan do not know this history. Most people do not know that the community of San Juan Hill was razed to make way for Lincoln Center. What this project sought to recover is the vibrancy of this African-Diasporic community. What is known of San Juan Hill is that many

of the people who lived there joined the ranks of the largely African-American community in Harlem. So far, we have tracked a few of the survivors from San Juan Hill still resident in Harlem. And, quite unexpectedly, the students have found a church that was once vibrant in San Juan Hill that has relocated and is still very active in Harlem. The students from Harlem visited the students in Jamaica and vice versa. The grant was funded by the United States State Department and administered by the American Museum Association. My hope is that other countries from the Caribbean will apply for this grant because it is a wonderful opportunity!

NEW POSSIBILITIES

LK: Music is one genre you haven't yet, as far as I know, imported into your broad artistic array of expression, though musical references do appear in your written work, and your text-based drip-paintings in the "Zion" and "Babylon" visual arts projects have used reggae lyrics and dancehall posters. Let me conclude our interview by asking you this: If you were going to add music to your already incredibly diverse and remarkable artistic production, what would your musical instruments and sounds of choice be?

JB: This question makes me smile. When I was in high school, I decided once to try out for the choir --- it did not go well. To make a long story short, there was a blind nun who was in charge of the choir, and when I tried out, she kept feeling around for the person who, for the life of her, could not carry a tune, and, yes, you guessed it --- I was that person, the only person ousted from the choir. Since then, I have been afraid to open my mouth in public and sing. I laugh about this now, but it was not funny then. So singing is out of the question for me. Jamaica has produced a lovely visual artist, Everald Brown, who, in addition to painting, would make the most remarkable instruments that were a hybrid of several instruments. I have long wondered if Brown's instruments work, because I have never heard them played, but if I were going to be a musical instrument I would most certainly be one of Brown's hard to decipher instruments. I also loved the handmade tambourines that I heard a lot of as a child growing up in Jamaica --- my grandmother had a lovely one made of goat skin that I would play with eternally, and so a tambourine is a possibility for me, as well. For all its issues, I love dancehall music, and within that genre, I adore the work of Tanya Stephens, who forefronts female desires and female sexuality in her music. I often joke that in my next life, I am going to be Tanya Stephens!